

# A moral audit of the British empire

*Piers Brendon, 6 November 2007*

5 The moral balance-sheet of the British empire is a chaotic mixture of black and red. So it is understandable that people today, trying to evaluate this momentous episode in what patriotic narratives refer to as "our island story", are confused. The New Labour government that came to power in 1997 is a case in point. After a trip to east Africa in 2005, Britain's then chancellor (now prime minister) Gordon Brown said that "the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over". Indeed, he asserted, the country should be proud of the empire. By contrast, Brown's predecessor as prime minister Tony Blair (who was still in office when the bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was marked) expressed "deep sorrow" for this imperial transgression. [...]

15 Yet the evidence is there to be assessed. True, just as a financial audit of empire cannot compute the profits that might have been made if Britain had invested at home instead of abroad, a moral audit cannot calculate what benefits might have accrued to India, say, if no colonial occupation had taken place. All the same, it is not too early - 250 years after the foundation of the Raj, 150 years after the Indian mutiny, sixty years after India's independence, as well as half a century after the first sub-Saharan African colony (Ghana) got self-government and a decade after the handover of Britain's last major overseas territory, Hong Kong - to set the empire's obvious  
20 pluses against its palpable minuses. How does it weigh up from the ethical point of view?

## The white gleam

On the credit side, first of all, the British empire was a liberal empire. It was founded on principles classically enunciated by Edmund Burke, who maintained that colonial government  
25 was a trust. It should to be exercised for the benefit of subject peoples, who would eventually attain their natural right to self-rule. As Burke famously declared: "The British Empire must be governed on a plan of freedom, for it will be governed by no other."

30 It is not surprising that subject peoples seldom accepted that the empire aimed at their advancement. Yet even when the mother country spoke in offensive terms - inhabitants of white dominions as well as coloured colonies were deemed "children" being nurtured for the freedoms and responsibilities of maturity - she frequently felt obliged to put her principles into practice. In most cases, British empire-builders took their civilising mission seriously.

35 Often they saw this as a matter of subduing "barbarism" and "savagery". Thus in India they did their best to eradicate thuggee and suttee, as General Sir Charles Napier rejected cultural relativism and promised to act according to the custom of his own country: "when men burn women alive we hang them." In Africa they endeavoured to put down slavery, Christian missionaries following the example of David Livingstone, who was said to have sacrificed his life  
40 "to heal this open sore of the world". In New Zealand they suppressed cannibalism and the traffic in tattooed Maori heads - traders had taken to bidding for them when they were still attached to shoulders. In Hong Kong they tried to stop foot-binding and infanticide.

Bearers of the "white man's burden" also laboured to promote the positive welfare of their

45 charges. At the top, for example, Lord Curzon worked indefatigably as viceroy to give India  
measures of justice, reform and social improvement. Taking to government (to paraphrase the  
Times) as other men take to drink, he aspired to give India the best administration it had ever  
had. He fostered commerce, expanded communications, developed irrigation, relieved famine,  
encouraged education, restored monuments, strengthened defence and promoted efficiency. He  
50 even ordered the removal of pigeon droppings from Calcutta's public library. [...]

Even George Orwell, who had seen colonial dirty work at close quarters in Burma in the 1920s,  
acknowledged that the British empire was much better than any other. It was vastly superior, in  
moral terms, to the French, German, Portuguese and Dutch empires. And it bore no  
55 resemblance to the "vampire empire" created by King Leopold of the Belgians in the Congo,  
which was responsible for perhaps 10 million deaths, let alone to the genocidal Nazi empire or  
to Japan's vicious and corrupt "greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere".

Finally, nothing better became the British empire than its dissolution. Facing adverse  
60 circumstances almost everywhere after the second world war, the British lived up to their  
magnanimous professions. They fulfilled their duty as trustees, giving their coloured colonies the  
autonomy (mostly within the multi-racial commonwealth) long enjoyed by the white dominions.  
The process was by no means free of trouble and bloodshed - in Malaya, Palestine, Kenya,  
Cyprus, Suez, Aden and elsewhere. The partition of India caused horrifying convulsion and  
65 carnage. And there was a nasty epilogue in Rhodesia and the Falklands. But there was nothing to  
compare with the bitter wars that the French fought before extricating themselves from Vietnam  
and Algeria. Thanks to pragmatic policies formulated in London, the empire experienced what  
Ronald Hyam (in Britain's Declining Empire) called "a quiet and easy death".

70 Macaulay had famously reckoned that the passing away of the imperial sceptre would be "the  
proudest day in English history". For he hoped his compatriots would leave behind an empire  
that was immune to decay, "the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature  
and our laws". Many pundits quoted him when praising or appraising the achievements of the  
empire. Wherever the map was painted red, Britain had disseminated its culture, language and  
75 technology, its ideals of democracy, good governance and free speech, its fondness for sport and  
fair play, its enlightened values and Christian civilisation. According to Allan Massie, writing after  
the handover of Hong Kong, the British empire had been "a force for good unrivalled in the  
modern world". Western Europe lived on the legacy of Rome, he said, and "our Empire leaves at  
least as rich a legacy to the whole world."

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### ***The red stream***

What of the debit side? The fact is that the phrase *Imperium et Libertas* was a contradiction in  
terms. What it meant in a Roman mouth, as William Gladstone said, was "Liberty for ourselves,  
Empire over the rest of mankind." In the British mouth "liberty" was part of the insufferable cant  
85 used to conceal the brutal realities of imperialism. The empire was "a despotism with theft as its  
final object", as George Orwell said, and the pukka sahib's code was slimy humbug. [...]

Actually, from the time that Britain had begun to transform its commercial dominance into  
political ascendancy, India was bled white. During the 1760s Bengal was so squeezed that the  
90 province, which the Mughals had called "the paradise of earth", became an abyss of torment. It

was ravaged by war, pestilence and famine. A third of the population died of hunger, some driven to cannibalism. Although relief efforts were made, British "bullies, cheats and swindlers" continued to prey on the carcass of Bengal and some profiteered in hoarded grain. Meanwhile Indian revenues spelled the redemption of Britain, according to the Earl of Chatham. They were

95 "a kind of gift from heaven".

The history of the Raj was punctuated by further famines, which caused tens of millions of deaths. These were not, as Mike Davis claims, colonial "holocausts". But the British failed lamentably in India, as they did in Ireland, in their duty of care. Condemning "humanitarian hysterics" during the worst Victorian famine, Lord Lytton said that the stoppage of his 1876 durbar "would be more disastrous to the permanent interests of the Empire than twenty famines". Despite pleas from the secretary of state for India during the terrible 1943-44 Bengal famine, Churchill refused to divert scarce shipping to Calcutta. He thought that "the starvation of anyway underfed Bengalis" was less serious than that of sturdy Greeks, particularly as Indians

100 would go on breeding "like rabbits". [...]

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Resistance evidently licensed disproportionate retaliation. When crushing opposition in Ceylon in 1818, the British killed over 1% of the population. Thirty years later not a single European on the island perished in the only insurrection worthy of the name. But 200 alleged rebels were

110 hanged or shot, and more were flogged or imprisoned. Governor Eyre's reprisals after the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica followed the same pattern. In the wake of their disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842, the British meted out enough retributive homicide to earn the perpetual enmity of Afghanistan. Burma, Kenya and Iraq were subjugated with equal violence. After the Indian mutiny soldiers such as Garnet Wolseley did much to fulfil their vow to spill

115 "barrels and barrels of the filth which flows in these niggers' veins for every drop of blood" they had shed. During the South African war the British allowed a sixth of the Boer population, mostly children, to die in concentration camps.

The catalogue of gross imperial wrongdoing is not hard to extend. It includes instances of

120 exploitation such as the slave trade and the indentured labour traffic; cases of acquisitive aggression such the opium wars and the rape of Matabeleland; acts of vandalism such as the burning of the Chinese emperor's summer palace in Beijing and the destruction of the Mahdi's tomb at Omdurman; squalid fiascos such as the Jameson raid and the Suez invasion; crimes such as the use of dum-dum bullets and poison gas against "uncivilised tribes" (Churchill's phrase);

125 massacres such as occurred at Amritsar in 1919, Batang Kali in Malaya in 1948 (the "British My Lai") and Hola camp in Kenya in 1959.

One should also list evils, such as torture and looting, which were endemic throughout the empire. Prize items of pillage, incidentally, were sent to Windsor Castle and, despite some

130 restitution, most of them evidently remain in royal hands. Least among the treasures Queen Victoria received from Emperor Hsien-Feng's summer palace was a Pekinese dog, which she called Looty.

However, the indictment is not complete without mention of imperial sins of omission. Although

135 some British officials were racist bullies - Bertrand Russell went so far as to call the empire "a cesspool for British moral refuse" - most were stultifyingly conventional. They had the vices of their virtues. Pig-sticking, gin-swigging public-school men, who held aloof from their charges or

140 treated them with studied arrogance, they were dedicated to maintaining the imperial status quo. Nothing illustrates this better than Governor Richard Casey's shocked report on his province as the Raj neared its end:

145 "Bengal has, practically speaking, no irrigation or drainage, a medieval system of agriculture, no roads, no education, no cottage industries, completely inadequate hospitals ... and no adequate machinery to cope with distress. There are not even plans to make good these deficiencies."

Needless to say, much of the imperial legacy was failed states and internecine strife.

### ***History's verdict***

150 All balance-sheets require interpretation; but it seems clear that, even according to its own lights, the British empire was in grave moral deficit. This should come as no surprise. Britain's conquests were necessarily violent and its subsequent occupations were usually repressive. Imperial powers lack legitimacy and govern irresponsibly, relying on force, collaboration and propaganda. But no vindication, even that formulated by Burke, can eradicate the instinctive hostility to alien control. *Libertas* opposes *imperium*.

155 Edward Gibbon, himself wedded to liberty, went to the heart of the matter: "A more unjust and absurd constitution cannot be devised than that which condemns the natives of a country to perpetual servitude, under the arbitrary dominion of strangers."

160 Gibbon's admonitions are for the ages, but they seem peculiarly pertinent at a time when American and British leaders have fatally succumbed to the lure of neo-imperial adventure. The first sentence he ever published, in his (1761), epitomised his immortal work *Essay on the Study of Literature*:

165 "The history of empires is the history of human misery."

### **ANNOTATIONS**

**Edmund Burke:** famous British 18<sup>th</sup> century writer and political thinker – **the Raj:** British colonial rule in India – **the Indian mutiny:** a large revolt by Indian soldiers of the British East India Company in 1857, brutally crushed by the British military – **greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere:** Japanese rule over East Asia during the Second World War – **thuggee:** Indian cult that frequently strangled innocents as sacrifices to the goddess Kali – **suttee:** ancient Hindu practice of burning widows at their husbands' funeral – **foot-binding:** old Chinese custom of crippling the feet of young girls to render them more 'beautiful' – **infanticide:** in ancient China, female babies were often put to death – **Rhodesia and the Falklands:** in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain fought two wars over these former colonies – **William Gladstone:** British prime minister of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – **the Mughals:** a dynasty of Muslim emperor's who ruled parts of India from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – **Winston Churchill:** British prime minister during the Second World War – **Edward Gibbon:** British writer who "The History and Decline of the Roman Empire".